

SALT & PEPPER

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BY RASHMI NARAYAN



Tabasco has come a long way from the swamps of Louisiana. Over the last century, the sauce has become a staple in kitchen cupboards, hole-in-the-wall dives, oyster bars, street food trucks, and fine dining restaurants in more than 195 countries across the globe. Tabasco sauce has been a welcome addition in the rations of the U.S. military; British archaeologist Howard Carter carried along a bottle of the sauce while searching for the tomb of King Tutankhamun; the sauce was airlifted by NASA to SKYLAB in the 1970s when the astronauts complained about their bland fare. Today, Tabasco holds a royal warrant from Her Majesty the Queen of England and has made

film appearances including with Charlie Chaplin and James Bond. And it's done all this in a bottle that makes it small enough to fit in a plastic bag in one's carry-on luggage.

Tabasco sauce itself is made with just three ingredients: pepper, salt and vinegar. This is largely due to the fact that the company was basically founded on a giant pile of salt.

Millions of years ago, what is now the Mississippi Delta was covered by an ancient sea. As the sea gradually drew back, it left behind a thick layer of salt, and over time, that salt was covered in several layers of rocks and sediment. When in high concentrations under-

ground, salt moves and undulates almost like a sea itself, resulting in domes of salt pushing towards the surface. Sometimes, the domes rise up to create hills that can reach thousands of feet in height and up to five miles in width. There are five such salt hills, or islands, in southern Louisiana: Jefferson Island, Weeks Island, Cote Blanche, Belle Isle and, most importantly, Avery Island, the ancestral home of Tabasco.

In the 19th century United States, salt was useful in myriad ways, including for preserving food, tanning leather, and, most obviously, sustaining human life. These roles gained even greater importance with the outset of the Civil War (1861-65) and the need for supplies to sustain the military. While the North accessed most of its own salt domestically through salt springs found near Syracuse, New York, the Confederacy imported salt from Great Britain and the Caribbean. In the Antebellum period, the region used approximately 450 million pounds of salt each year, with much of it arriving in bulk on the vessels plying the cotton trade.

One of the Union's first acts during the Civil War was to impose a blockade on southern trade, preventing the Confederacy from both exporting slave-grown cash crops and importing vital salt supplies. The South rapidly consumed all their salt stockpiles and by 1862, the region was in the midst of a salt famine. That year also saw dozens of women march on the local railroad in Alabama shouting "Salt or Blood!" Hungry soldiers, who were also suffering from salt deprivation, deserted their posts and returned to their families.

The South needed salt and Confederate leaders sought to encourage domestic production by any means necessary, offering rewards for locating salt deposits and encouraging entrepreneurs to open salt mines and saline artesian wells. One of the centers of this new southern salt boom was New Iberia, Louisiana, home to the now famous salt domes. It was there, in 1862, that Daniel D. Avery began working the salt springs on what he called Avery Island. Later that year, Avery was joined by his son-in-law, a former banker named Edmund





McIlhenny, who quickly took charge of the salt business.

In 1863, Union forces seized New Iberia and took control over Avery Island, forcing the McIlhenny family to flee to Texas. They eventually returned to Avery Island, but by the end of the decade their focus was no longer solely on salt production. Edmund McIlhenny was a food lover and gardening enthusiast and at some point, he was given seeds of *Capsicum frutescens* peppers. Although the plant originally hailed from somewhere in Mexico or Central America, they thrived in the humid environment of the Louisiana bayou.

Ever a gourmand, McIlhenny mashed some of these deep red peppers with a small amount of salt and left the mixture to age in stoneware jars. In 1868, he combined this mixture with a little vinegar, bottled it in small cologne-type bottles, and started selling his “Tabasco” sauce in and around New Orleans.

According to the company’s history, the name Tabasco itself is derived from an

indigenous word meaning “the place where the soil is humid” or “the place of the coral or oyster shell.” Not only did this name perfectly describe the sauce’s origins in the bayou, but it also described exactly how the sauce would be consumed. The rich waters of the Mississippi Delta provided the region with an abundance of oysters that were inexpensive at the time and ubiquitous. Visitors to the city in the late 19th century could not help but marvel at the diversity and decadence of oyster cooking. Tabasco and oysters seemed like a perfect match and Creole cuisine soon adopted McIlhenny’s sauce as one of its staples.

Although the fame of Tabasco has since spread well beyond New Orleans, the brand remains family owned. And while white oak barrels have replaced the stoneware jars, and a few other peppers, such as jalapeños and chipotles, have made it into the company’s different sauce lines, the sauce recipe itself has remained remarkably unchanged over the past 150 years. Regardless of the type, all the peppers are still hand-

picked, mashed, mixed with a small amount of salt, and left to age for up to three years. After the pepper mash ages, it is inspected by a member of the McIlhenny family, often the President and CEO Harold Osborn, who represents the fifth generation at Avery Island. Once approved, the fully aged mash is blended with distilled vinegar for up to 28 days, after which the pepper skins, pulp and seeds are strained out, leaving behind the iconic sauce for bottling.

More importantly, the sauce remains an important part of the cuisine of its birthplace. “We cook with Tabasco in moderation due to its pungency. If we want to make something ‘hot’, we use cayenne, whereas if we are looking to season something well, we lean on Tabasco, as it gives us spice and acid from vinegar,” says Louisiana chef Brian Landry, who owns QED hospitality in New Orleans. “I depend on three of Tabasco’s sauces —The original for a finishing touch on anything I eat. I cook with the chipotle version and jalapeño version. The latter is absolutely delicious for salads. The former is a versatile sauce that works

well in marinades and smoked meats,” he adds.

Avery Island is also the place where there’s a lush jungle, vibrant colored peppers grow, and 700,000 bottles are produced per day. That’s more Tabasco sauce in one day than founder Edmund McIlhenny produced in his lifetime. The success of the brand this island produced was best summed up by journalist Jeffrey Rothfeder in his book *McIlhenny’s Gold: How a Louisiana Family Built the Tabasco Empire*. “If you need to blow your nose, you think ‘Kleenex.’ If you want to liven up a bland gumbo, you think ‘Tabasco.’ ■

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